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Through the Eyes of the Child

Initiative Focuses Court on New Vision for Nebraska's Abused and Neglected Children



Jennifer Renne, Assistant Director of Child Welfare at the ABA Center on Children and the Law, addresses participants at the Nebraska Children's Summit.

Out of the Nebraska Supreme Court's Children's Summit, held September 25-27, 2006, in Nebraska City, this message rang loud and clear: "View the court and foster care system through the eyes of children." After two-and-one-half days at the summit, a diverse group of Nebraska leaders, who at times disagreed on approaches to protect the best interests of children, did agree in the end that meaningful improvements must be made to protect our state's most vulnerable citizens—abused and neglected children and those in foster care. The resulting new initiative is called, "Through the Eyes of the Child."

Participants at the summit were organized in 25 community-based teams, led by a local judge. All state judges with juvenile jurisdiction are involved with a team and, most often, designated as the team leader. Other team members included county attorneys, guardians ad litem, Health and Human Service representatives, CASA volunteers, attorneys representing parents, and members of the Foster Care Review Board.

Nebraska's new Chief Justice Mike Heavican states, "This new initiative is owned by every team member across Nebraska—judges, social workers and administrators, attorneys, guardians ad litem, and more—and its success will depend on the success of the local teams that comprise it."

Among those leading the summit were then Chief Justice John V. Hendry, Governor Dave Heineman, and Attorney General Jon Bruning who all spoke with one voice in requesting improvement of the governmental system for helping abused and neglected children. Heavican, Justices of the Nebraska Supreme Court, and Judges of the Court of Appeals joined in conversations that included the 25 interdisciplinary teams of professionals.

Issues Addressed at Summit

Keynote speaker for the summit was Judge William Byars, Jr., Director of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and former South Carolina trial court judge. Byars discussed the impact the current process, including delay and uncertainty, has on children.



Children's Summit

Judge Kathleen Blatz, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Minnesota, also addressed the summit in the keynote capacity. She discussed the difficulties involved in implementing system change. She described the Minnesota Children's Initiative, its challenges, processes and impact on children as well as the importance of judicial and other leadership in effecting change.

The second day of the summit provided time for the 25 teams to meet individually then make a report to the group. Judge Stephen Rubin, Immediate Past President of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), gave an overview of the Resource Guidelines developed by the NCJFCJ. One of the goals of the State Plan is to implement the Resource Guidelines in every Nebraska court with juvenile jurisdiction. Jennifer Renne, Assistant Director of Child Welfare at the ABA Center on Children and the Law, and Julie Wise, Program Manager, Permanency Planning for Children, NCJFCJ, continued the discussion of national resources available.

Leslie Heimov, Project Director, Home at Last, Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, was joined by a number of youth who discussed increasing the participation of youth in foster care proceedings.

Rubin reviewed the preliminary protective custody hearings, and Judge Linda Porter, Lancaster County Separate Juvenile Court Judge, led the group through Court Orders: IV-E Requirements. Teams were given time to review the Court Improvement Project



Judge Kathleen Blatz, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Minnesota, describes the Minnesota Children's Initiative.

Reassessment findings, including permanency outcomes in each team's judicial district. Teams also reviewed "best practices" outlined in the Nebraska Court Practice Guides adapted from Minnesota and held discussions on the Preliminary Protective Custody Hearing.

The final day of the summit began with an overview of the successes of problem-solving practices in Nebraska including Family Drug Treatment Courts, Family Group Conferencing, and Mediation. The remainder of the morning was focused on timely and fair adjudication hearings and meaningful dispositional hearings, led by Deputy Chief Magistrate Carla Guenther, Hamilton County Juvenile Court (Ohio). She presented the Cincinnati Model Court, and again the teams broke into small groups to discuss the Cincinnati Model and to begin an action plan for their own communities.

In the afternoon, Guenther addressed Permanency Planning Hearings, and Porter concluded her discussion from the previous day on Court Orders: IV-E Requirements. Team discussions on permanency planning hearings followed. The final presentation of the summit was delivered by Judge James Payne, Director, Indiana Department of Child Services. Payne gave poignant suggestions on ways

Chief Justice Mike Heavican (center back) meets with conference organizers Dr. Victoria Weisz (left) and State Court Administrator Janice Walker (center) as they talk with Minnesota's former Chief Justice, Kathleen Blatz (right).



Children's Summit



Co-Chair of the Commission on Children in the Courts, Court of Appeals Chief Judge Everett Inbody (center), gives report on the Children's Summit to Chief Justice's Leadership Group as Justice Kenneth Stephan (left) and Judge Jim Livingston (right) listen to goals of the group.

others involved in the juvenile court process was unique and has great potential to benefit the children and families involved in juvenile court proceedings."

Call to Action

The Summit had begun with Co-Chairs of the Commission on Children in the Courts, Chief Judge Everett Inbody and Separate Juvenile Court Judge Doug Johnson presenting a Save the Children tie to Hendry in recognition of his leadership and commitment to improving Nebraska's court

the judges and the child protection agencies can best work together. He touched on differences in perspectives, workload, authority, and motivation issues.

Sandra Allen, a team member in the 5th Judicial District and Deputy County Attorney in Platte County commented, "The conference provided a great opportunity to exchange ideas on how to better meet the needs of abused and neglected children in our community. It is now up to all of us to implement what we learned so that all of our children live in a safe and loving home."

Cindy Williams, a 30-year veteran of the Department of Health and Human Services said, "I believe the opportunity to meet as a team with judges, prosecutors, attorneys and

system for children. At the end of the summit, Hendry issued a call to action and introduced Heavican. Hendry remarked that, rather than passing off a gavel, he was proud to present a Save the Children tie to Heavican as a symbol of the importance of the Court's work with children, Nebraska's most important and most vulnerable citizens.

Heavican, in follow-up correspondence to Summit participants wrote, "During his tenure, Chief Justice Hendry made children his first priority and encouraged every other Nebraskan to do the same . . . I plan to continue Justice Hendry's vision and ensure the success of this statewide collaborative initiative in improving outcomes for children in the abuse/neglect court system through the implementation of the best practices of the Resource Guidelines."



Chief Justice Mike Heavican in his Children's Summit tie titled "Helping Children and Their Families Around the World" created by twelve-year-old Dana through Save the Children.

Judge Gendler to Head New Initiative

Chairing the new "Through the Eyes of the Child" Initiative is Sarpy County Separate Juvenile Court Judge Lawrence Gendler who characterizes the Summit as being "a terrific thing . . . everybody in one room pursuing the same goal, being in agreement on what we need to do." The Initiative provides "marching orders" for the 25 teams that helped develop the initiative through their participation in the Children's Summit. According to Gendler, the teams will work locally to implement best practices for children in the court system. He indicates that his trip in mid-November to the

Children's Summit

Sidney area, with stops along the way, represents the first of many miles he plans to log as he aspires to one of his goals—to visit all 25 teams and their lead judges within the next two years.

Other goals Gendler shares for the Initiative are these:

1. To develop, by the end of 2006, a written guide for teams. The guide will be used to help the teams measure where they are and where they want to be.
2. To standardize court order forms. The forms will incorporate new laws and regulations, particularly those included in the Safe Family Act and will help the court determine where they are in their timelines toward permanency.
3. To create a Web site on which teams can post their activities and successes. The Web site will also host podcast training videos, appropriate for all team members.

Gendler indicates that, so far, he is encouraged by the Initiative. He suggests that the “proof will come in a couple of years with regard to permanency for youngsters.” Again reflecting on the Summit, he comments that “(Everyone) committed to do something—important for the system. A rare thing.”

Looking Forward

Inbody has high praise for the new leaders in Nebraska's efforts to help the children of the state. He indicates that he has worked with Gendler for a long time in other endeavors of the Court. Inbody characterizes Gendler as a



Separate Juvenile Court Judge Larry Gendler serves as chairman for the Supreme Court's Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative.

wonderful individual and is pleased Gendler has accepted the responsibility of chairing the Initiative.

Inbody has every reason to feel confident as the Initiative goes forward. He refers to Chief Justice Heavican as a positive influence with the Court regarding the Initiative. He believes that Heavican will continue Hendry's involvement to change juvenile court and will see how the operation is going through the eyes of the child.



The summit was made possible through the generous support of the State Justice Institute.



Judge Richard Krepela (front left) stresses a point with 7th Judicial District Team.